

## Gender Sensitivity and Leadership Style in Nigeria

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### Abstract

Leadership trait is inherent in human being, as it can be natural or natural as the case may be. There are instances where either of the sexes has assumed the position of leadership. In Nigerian situation, leadership is conspicuously dominated by the male sex. The issue here is the discrimination, marginalization and non-recognition of the female sex in matters of leadership. This poses a challenge to the country in terms of national development. This paper intends to examine gender and the leadership style in Nigerian context, the aim is to argue in support of gender sensitivity to women in connection to leadership. This will be based on equal rights and the opportunity for both sexes as it relates to leadership, preferably complementary system of the duo. This is hinged on political liberty, where every legitimate person enjoys the freedom to participate in public affairs of the land.

The argument of this paper is that over the years, agitations were high on flagrant disregard of the female gender in leadership of the Nigerian state as an improper display of mysogist strength. The paper argues that women should be properly placed in the allocation of positions of authority in the state and not seen as second class citizen as is the case presently in Nigeria. It is the contention of this paper that a complementary approach will do a lot more in resolving the crisis associated with complete isolation, alienation and annihilation of the female gender in leadership. The paper adopts a critical analysis and exposition in driving home its point.

**Keywords:** Gender; Sensitivity; Leadership

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**Citation:** Ikegbu EA, Odey M (2018) Gender Sensitivity and Leadership Style in Nigeria. Glob J Res Rev Vol.5 No.2:7

**Received:** September 03, 2018; **Accepted:** September 20, 2018; **Published:** September 29, 2018

### Introduction

The idea of leadership as being a domain for the male sex in Nigeria has been in place for centuries and many persons in this clime have come to accept it as normal. However, with the rise of feminist movement, the above claim is being questioned and a rethink is now evoked to correct such faulty assumption, likewise a call for gender sensitivity in leadership especially to the female sex as they have suffered mistreatment of various kinds. The argument here is that, the concept of leadership does not stipulate that, it is the exclusive reserve of a particular sex. The female sex is no less human, it is also a rational being just as the male

counterpart. Leadership is more of a rational enterprise involving all categories of persons and does not border on biological/physiological functions. This is because other lower class animals also possess similar biological features just as human beings. Also, to anchor human existence on the biological or physiological features alone, will imply man's digression to Thomas Hobbes' gory state of nature. The biological attributes of the sexes should not be used as a yardstick for socio-political nor, should it be used to determine performance index of any of the sexes.

Leadership entails the ability of a person or group of persons to command obedience to rules for the realization and achievement

of the stated goals of an organization. This quality or attribute involves men and women. It is wrong therefore, to alienate a particular sex and strip it off of any opportunity to lead simply on account of sex. This phenomenon is very dangerous and unhealthy as it will play negatively to the growth and development of the society in all facets of existence.

## Conceptual Clarification

### Gender

Gender as a concept occupied a significant place in Nigeria, when it comes to leadership. It has varied meanings but at the root of it, is the idea of a socio-culturally- induced belief which states the functions and roles that is expected to be played by both sexes – male and female aside from their biological functions. Gender is more or less a social construct, “a socially constructed inequality between women and men” [1]. It is clearly argued that:

Gender is a social construct, it defines and differentiates the roles, rights, responsibilities and obligations of women and men. The innate biological difference between female and men form the basis of social norms that define appropriate behaviours for women and men and determine the differential social, economic and political power between the sexes [2].

In the same vein, the United Nations definition of gender as cited by Ikegbu EA [3] avers thus:

... the qualities associated with men and women that are socially and culturally, than biologically determined, gender includes the way in which the society differentiate appropriate behaviour and access to power for women and men, although the details vary from society to society and change overtime, gender relations tend to include a strong element of inequality between women and men and are strongly influenced by ideology.

From what was stated above on gender, it is obvious that gender is not a natural phenomenon but an idea that is deeply rooted in the psychic of many persons particularly Nigeria in the determination of what functions to perform by the people – would this and this be performed by a man or woman because of who the person is and not the mental wellness of the being.

### Leadership

Eyo EB and Udofia CA gave the etymology of leadership as being derived from the Old English word ‘Laeden’ which means ‘lead’ [4]. It is the act and art of guiding, conducting, taking decision, etc. According to them, leadership could be viewed as the act or art of decision making in conducting affairs whether personal or impersonal. Eyo and Udofia went further to x-ray the position of Kant by arguing that Leadership that falls within the realm of practical reason or morals, deals with the oughtness of human behaviour [4]. Mamadu, carefully articulated the views of Peretomode on what constitutes leadership as he rightly said that: leadership is an “ability of a person in a group to persuade, inspire or influence the attitudes, behaviour and actions of others or the activities of the organization so that the group members can work cooperatively and enthusiastically towards goal achievement” [5].

From what have been garnered so far, leadership is not a business or enterprise for a particular sex or select group. Any person or group of persons, society, state or organization categorizing leadership in class, race, gender and ethnicity is rather sowing seed of destruction.

### Gender and leadership style in Nigeria

This paper contends that gender is not a natural phenomenon but an artificial creation which has adversely affected the female sex when the issue of leadership is in focus. Leadership as a concept is not bent in favour or disfavour of any particular sex. It is in this vein that Ucheaga [6] aligning with Plato, argues:

There is therefore, no administrative occupation which is peculiar to women as women or man as man; natural capacities are similarly attributed in each sex and it is natural for women to take part in all occupations as well as men.

Thus, there are Queens and Kings, heroes and heroines, this implies positions of leadership, but not so in many African societies where the position of leadership is dominated by the male sex particularly Nigeria, where the tradition of male domination, marginalization and suppression are out of proportion. Following this trend of gender disparity where men take charge of both the private and public spheres, women found solace in domestic chores, comforting themselves of a lingering and unabated frustration which education and civilization coupled with rapid romanticization of European and America cultures have not checked the excesses. According to Agbasiere as cited in Oyonumoh [7]:

Traditionally, women do not have an active voice in purely political affairs that is the privilege of a final say in any decision concerning matters of common interest. However, women possessed a consultative voice which can exert significant political influence especially in matter that concerns women directly. In matters of communal interests a woman like a man is expected to speak her mind; ... but usually final decision rests with the male elders [3].

Although the traditional Nigerian elders were mostly men, nonetheless there were situations when the actions of women do speak louder than their words. In his Anatomy of Female Power, Chinweizu [8] described a scene that:

As part of the intricate system of checks and balances in some traditional African societies, women exercise the most effective sanction against misrule when a king becomes intolerable of his subjects, a procession of grandmothers will march naked to his palace, no ruler survives this final dramatic repudiation by the mothers of his subjects usually, the threat of these mothers is enough to bring erring dictatorial rulers to heel.

Again, it was contended that, Nigerian women in pre-colonial and colonial period confronted and overcome oppression and violence. Women were able to confront the government and make it reverse its decisions. The cases of various women riots and demonstrations come to mind [4]. From the position of Agbasiere that says women do not have an active voice in purely political affair is not the whole truth, it also validates

the argument that, followership is intrinsic part and parcel of leadership. It is important to state here, that, there are some female figures both in the past and present who have served as an icon of leadership. In this regard are the legendary monarchs and living heroines who had reigned creditably in their various domains. The position and efforts of people like Luwo Gbadiaya of Ife, Iyayun of Oyo, Queen Amina of Zauzau, Queen Daura of Daura, Queen Kanbasa of Bonny, etc are brought to bear [9]. It is impossible to give complete list of women who have in one way or the other served as an icon of leadership in Nigeria or had played a significant role in shaping of Nigeria or their peculiar environment, the above listed is to balance the view that says, women cannot or have not served as head of their people.

### Gender sensitivity in the colonial era of Nigeria

Though in the pre-colonial Nigeria, the issue of gender and leadership was to the advantage of the men as against the women, the colonial system made it worst. It was observed that colonialism did not deviate from the preclusion of women from public sphere, colonialism itself was a male-dominated venture as all colonial officers were male [10]. The Sir Hugh Clifford constitution of 1922 which was widely believed to have introduced the first elective principle in the colonial era in Nigeria, should have addressed the imbalance in the polity, rather it disenfranchised women, and this was one instance of marginalization and discrimination against women. Clifford's constitution would have laid a formidable foundation for the integration of the female gender in the administration of the Nigerian state, rather his leadership of exclusionism of Nigerian people in the executive list affected both sexes. A report has it that, it was in the 1950s that women in the Southern Nigeria were enfranchised. In the Northern region, it was in the 70s [11]. About this period "Three women were appointed into the House of Chiefs: namely Mrs. Olufunmilayo Rasnsom Kuti, appointed into the Western Nigeria House of Chiefs Mrs. Margaret Ekpo and Janet Mokelu both appointed into the Eastern Nigeria House of Chiefs [11]. The appointment of women in the Northern, Western and Eastern Houses of Chiefs at the time was a cynosure of the need and rationale to include women in the leadership of their region at all spheres. The necessity of being gender sensitive is to ensure peaceful co-existence and gender balancing in the distribution of portfolios.

### Gender in Post-independence Nigeria

Following Nigeria's political independence in 1<sup>st</sup> October, 1960, the issue of gender insensitivity to women in the leadership structure was glaring despite the role that women played in the agitation for independence. It is said that in Nigeria, it was only four women that were members of parliament in their various Regional Houses of Assembly and there was no woman in the cabinet membership. With the military taking over the mantle of leadership of Nigeria, female gender was further reduced to a state of nothingness. The military found the civilian male gender unfit to be in the saddle of leadership, let alone, their women counterparts. It was in the second Republic election of 1979 that gender sensitivity improved a little more by having seven members in the parliament.

However, the military regime of Gen Babangida somewhat rekindled the hope of women in leadership saddle. The wife of the military Head of State, Mrs Mryam Babangida for the first time campaigned and introduced the office of the First Lady. This office was a channel to advance the cause and struggle of women towards positive recognition. To this, Amina, Mama [12] argues;

... Bababgida's regime is likely to go down in history as one in which women gained prominence. This was not because it had radical gender politics but because his wife engaged in highly published activities and ordered other wives of the military oligarchs to replicate her example. Mrs. Babangida's impact on the body politics ought to be assessed against the extreme marginalization of women in the Nigerian state and national politics under both military and civilian regimes.

The point underscores the fact that, Mrs. Babangida countered the gender discrimination against women, she was not content with the gender dichotomy that says, women's functions and roles in life should start and end in the domestic sphere, rather she challenged women to take active participation in leadership through their involvement in public affairs.

It was observed that from independence in 1960 to 1999 only about 3.1% of women were elected into political office and 5% into appointive position respectively [4]. This development was made possible with the singular efforts of Mrs Maryam Abacha, the First Lady whose family Support Programme (FSP) organized women to attend the Beijing Conference of 1995 in China. It was at this conference that women campaigned that a certain 30% of the total political offices be given to them. To some, this demand sounds very orderly and a healing balm to redressing a conflicting situation among the genders.

### Gender and leadership in the contemporary Nigeria

The poor and discriminative attitude towards women in matters that pertain to leadership led to the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) held in Beijing, China, in 1995 where the representatives of women worldwide took a stand for women to achieve parity with men in leadership and decision-making within the public institution of state [13]. Nigerian women were involved in the conference as a sign of their interest in leadership and politics. It is interesting to note that, this was during the military administration of Gen Sani Abacha. The rationale behind it, is that, politics and government are now an important arena of political action and discourse for contemporary women's movements [13]. The year 1999, marked the beginning of a new dawn as Nigeria returned to civilian government through electoral process. The political landscape saw an improvement in gender sensitivity to women in the leadership structure. Available records have shown that women had occupied and are still holding political positions both in the elective and appointive offices. Perhaps, it was in response to United Nation's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which has Gender Equality as one of its targets [12]. Even with the positive responses to gender sensitivity in the leadership style, the situation fell below the recommendation of 30% by the Beijing Affirmative Platform for

Action in 1995 and the 35% recommendation of National Policy on Women adopted in July 2000. Previously, it was alleged that most Nigerian women lack the resources and willpower to engage in leadership, but as such allegation turn out to be untrue, the gender perspective in disadvantage to women becomes the latest mechanism of exclusion used against women in terms of leadership position. In this connection, Omotola [10] observed thus; the world (Nigeria) today is disproportionately skewed and rigged by men against women. The contention expressed here is that, the previous excuse of why women cannot favourably and competitively engage in leadership is no more, because women have struggled to defend and advance their individual and collective interests under the changing condition [12]. A new challenge is now erected "institution and cultural mechanism of exclusion". It is a truism that many Nigerian women have worked hard to get the needed resources both human and non-human in order to be suitable for leadership roles but it seems that the padlock has been changed for the key that was found – cultural mechanism of exclusion. This cultural mechanism has adversely affected women, giving wrong impression that it was wrong for them to venture into politics. In fact, it is a very negative barrier to the growth and development of female gender. The culture of a people ought not to be an impediment for the survival of that people, but in this case, it has constituted itself a dangerous check to the struggle of women.

The question here is, why the change and the erection of institution and cultural mechanism of exclusion of women or the poor and negative attitudes towards women in matters of leadership? If Nigerian men claim to have the birth right to dominate the leadership position, then, let there be a level playing field for the women to get involved and let the game be neutral.

It was argued that, in situation where women are in position of leadership, women's peculiar interest are fairly represented in decision-making bodies, women press for different priorities than those emphasized by men. Grown and others argue that: "women are often active in supporting laws benefiting children and family, evidence suggests that women's participation in political decision-making bodies improves the quality of governance" [2]. The issues of bad governance in Nigeria can be linked to male dominance of the political space, whereas women's participation in politics especially in decision-making has fostered peace, tranquility and mutual co-existence. It will be agreed that these are the necessary conditions needed for national development. Esidene and Abdul rightly contend that many uncanny things go with politics in undeveloped societies; such as, vote buying, ballot box stuffing, arson, assassination of political opponent's violence and the like. Perhaps, these issues may not be associated with women.

On the part of Agbalajobi:

Winning public elections in Nigeria is a matter of force, do-or-die affairs, therefore, those who possess physical stamina and strength, do use brutal force are men, hence, women should have to give way for the men to take whatever is available by force.

These negative features that usually characterized Nigeria's politics are some of the cultural mechanisms of exclusion, being used to term politics as a dirty game, thus women cannot follow in these nefarious activities. Although, the concepts of politics as well as leadership are different, nonetheless they are *pari passu*. It was Omotola [10] that posits:

... as we may have known, power is at the very heart of politics. And given the pertinence of power as resources any means of acquiring it, in the Machiavellian tradition is justifiable, whatever the motivation for seeking power, be it personal, collective or psychological ends. It is doubtful whether any holder(s) of power will voluntarily relinquish it for whatever reason, it is the power seeker who has the responsibility to struggle to acquire it at all cost.

What the above suggests is that, politics as well as leadership has being reduced to the peripheral, while the intellectual aspect is relegated to the background. This attitude has led to the marginalization and discrimination of women in terms of leadership as being inferior hence, unfit for leadership. Unfortunately, many persons have keyed into this negative orientation, the truth is that, this is not natural neither is it correct but psychologically imbued into many Nigerian women such that from the point of birth, an orientation is given to them (women) discouraging them from having or developing interest in the political landscape of their land [3]. Following this discouragement, many women then fall into the trap of inferiority to the men and they succumb to the gender dichotomy of different functions and roles prescribed for the various sexes, which state that, men are suitable for both the private and public sphere, while the women are only fitted to play the domestic roles. Ikegbu [3] described this as:

A widespread, irrational, illogical, senseless and unscientific notion calculated at demeaning and devaluing the potency of the female gender by inputting that women of all ages and standard irrespective of their high command of educational pedigree would always end in the kitchen. This erroneous discriminating assertion held by the male counterpart depicts high level degree of oppression. Subjugation and irrational overwhelming of the mind-set.

The opinion and argument followed the age long tradition of placing men on top and women under which education and civilization should have addressed. The situation is so canny that even Ikegbu's new sermon of cologenderism and neo-cologenderism has not been able to remedy it. Although, cologenderism in the context of Ikegbu's philosophical assumptions strengthens the fact that each gender dominates the other depending on numerical strength. But, it is still observed that irrespective of the numerical strengths of women, they are still been marginalized.

What Nigerian women need now is to counter all these wrong and debased labeling which have been pushed on them by their male counterparts in order to discourage them from position of leadership. They should reject such tags as weaker sex, vulnerable, because of the role of childbearing and nursing and all such things. Their debate should anchor on the various



national and international conventions on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women which Nigeria as a nation is a signatory to.

## Future Arguments on Gender Sensitivity

Gender as a concept is a socio-humanistic construct – a gimmick, it is quite different from leadership as a concept. While gender is used as a manoeuvre tool to the disadvantage of mostly the female sex in terms of social functions and roles between the sexes. Leadership is not supposed to be subjected to the whims and caprices of any sex. Leadership as a concept, especially as it has been defined by various scholars contain such terms as; decision-making, ability to persuade, inspire or influence the behaviour and attitude of others, etc. These and many more cannot be the attribute, character or feature that is exclusive to a particular sex or gender – both the male and the female sexes have to acquire such attributes or nurture such character. Leadership is all about mutual participation with others, an individual cannot inspire or influences his/her behaviour and attitude all by his/herself. This suggests that, there must be the complementary side – followership, because leadership can only find meaning and expression when the complementary side (followership) is involved. Here, the term followership does not mean a subordinate or inferior person, but it denotes associates, admirers, peoples and believers [14]. It is obvious that, leadership and followership imply political participation. Meanwhile, political participation refers to a variety of ways whereby people try to exercise influence over the political process. It could also be seen as a conscious display of interest by humans in the political processes of a given polity.

Nevertheless, any political process that seeks to get the best brains must cut across gender, interestingly, the best of human brains do not function following the gender bifurcation, it is based on how it is nurtured and put to use, the likes of Queen Amina of Zauzau and others, the Olufunmilayo Ranson Kutis', the Margaret Ekpos', Hajiya Gambo Sawabas', the Okonjos', Oby Ezekwezilis', the Late Dora Akunyili, the Chimamanda Adichies' and others attest to this fact. Some Nigerian women have ventured into career and profession that were previously perceived to be exclusive for the male gender and they have produced excellent results, this give credence to the idea that it is valid for a woman to be in leadership [15]. More so, is the fact that, the various celebrated female icons in terms of leadership as mentioned above where given little or no opportunity to exercise their leadership prowess. Some of them operated under severe political conditions with draconian laws, religious injunctions, cultural and traditional impediments, lack of policy implementation, inadequate sensitization, unemployment, limited access to land and legal and social discriminations etc. If all these challenges were there and they still flourished, what then are the reasons for the contemporary Nigerian woman to be

lagging behind in terms of leadership? Probably, these celebrated women were more philosophically conscious and concerned than many of the present day Nigerian women. They do not demand their rights from the prevailing cultures and traditions neither do they succumb to the male's dominant of the public space, they rather assert their rights as human beings.

Thus, the society had to recognize and acknowledge them as leaders in their own right, the gimmick of gender could not play its trick on those heroines who have become reference point in terms of leadership. They transform rather than conform to the dictates of gender bifurcation. The point here is that, leadership should not be a one way traffic where only the male or female sex will dominate as it is being witnessed in Nigeria. Leadership has no gender colouration. A complementary and all-inclusive system of leadership will do the country much good, as it is said varieties is the species of life, when Nigeria become gender sensitive in its leadership structure, then the best of both sexes will come to bear. This paper proposes cooperation in the sense of complementary and all inclusive leadership construct rather than the gender polarization and competition for social functions and roles between the sexes in terms of leadership. Human's history is related with examples of this. The reason is simple both the male and female gender have the in-built potential and ability for leadership. So gender should not be used to thwart the in-built potentials for leadership in Nigeria. This does not give room for peaceful and harmonious development of the structures of the society, rather, it creates room for division and conflict in the polity.

## Conclusion

From the FWCW in Beijing, China in 1995, women in other parts of the world have reached the apex of leadership in their respective countries either as: President, Head of States or Heads of Government such countries as; Chile, Brazil, Germany, Liberia, Bangladesh, Finland, Jamaica, Latvia, Mozambique, New Zealand, the Philippine, Republic of Korea, Sao Tome and Principe, Great Britain, etc. Also in many countries judicial arm, National and Regional Parliaments, women have achieved and have even surpasses the 30% Affirmative Action's Plan for Women in Government [16]. Nigeria has similar or even better political environment as compared to some of these countries, but perhaps the government and people of these countries are more gender sensitive than Nigeria, because they have identified the leadership potentials of women, thus giving them the opportunity to lead and some of their results were excellent. No doubt, Nigeria has abundance of gifted women and men in terms of leadership, what is needed is a change of mind set and attitude towards the issue of gender and leadership, gender ought not to be mixed with leadership because leadership does not have gender colouration. The earlier Nigeria adopts an all inclusive complementary approach to leadership, the better for it as it will help it to navigate the process of development in all segments of the country.

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